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ABSTRACT

School reform in the 1990s has been focused on school-based restructuring, with local efforts shown to be more successful than earlier central or remote control approaches. Success has followed changes in teachers' classroom behavior, in the structure of the school, and its school culture. The local school restructuring approach is illustrated through two projects: Project SEARCH, a Jacob Javits Demonstration Project, promotes change one classroom at a time, through an individual approach to teachers. The South Carolina Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) uses an inquiry approach with teams of teachers to create positive school wide change. ASP teachers are involved in school-wide action research. Both programs have been used to restructure the "Middleton School," a Schoolwide Title I Project school serving an 87 percent African American student body in a rural area of South Carolina. The school's involvement in two projects with similar premises but different paradigms resulted in positive change: (1) teacher enpowerment has been positively affected by action research with greater participation by teachers in decision making; (2) curriculum and instruction have been modified to follow a gifted and talented model for all students with positive results; and (3) all the initiatives support each other through a process that actively involves teachers in both action and reflection. (Contains 25 references.) (JLS)

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School Improvement and Action Research: Two Paradigms

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School Improvement and Action Research: Two Paradigms

School reform efforts of the 1990s have focused heavily on restructuring schools to better serve all children, particularly those considered at-risk of failure. These restructuring efforts are largely school-based, relying on teachers, school-based administrators, staff, and in some cases, parents to make decisions about how the school should change. These efforts at reform have been much more effective than previous attempts to change schools by remote control through state, district, or university interventions (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Fine, 1994; Levin, 1995), but in many cases, changes of actual classroom behavior has been slow because schools focus largely on changing the structure of schooling, not what happens in the classroom (Elmore, 1995). This paper provides an example of how two reform efforts, sharing similar goals but targeting different components of a school, work together to make changes in individual teachers' classroom behavior, in the structure of the school and in its school culture.

The following documents the action research that is a part of two innovative projects and the effect of this research on a rural elementary school, serving a predominantly poor, African-American population. One project, Project SEARCH[1], a Jacob K. Javits Demonstration Project (Javits) promotes change one teacher at a time, one classroom at a time, through an individual, personal approach. The other project, the South Carolina Accelerated Schools Project (ASP)[2], utilizes an inquiry process to create positive schoolwide change. The focus of Javits, to effect change in

the classroom environment by using gifted and talented methods and materials with all children, complements ASP's goal of restructuring the governance of schools to accelerate the learning of all students. Both projects also engage teachers in action research; in the case of the Javits Project, they investigate their own teaching, while through the Accelerated Schools Project, teams of teachers engage in inquiry into schoolwide issues. In this paper, we examine these questions:

- How has this school's involvement in two projects with similar underlying premises, but different paradigms, increased its likelihood of positive change?
- In what ways has teacher empowerment been affected by the use of action research?
- What has been the impact on the curriculum and instruction, and how is this impact linked to the school's improvement efforts?

Action Research and Its Role in Educational Reform

Action research has been defined as "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it." (Elliot, J., 1991, p. 69). The goal of this definition as applied to action research in schools is the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. Glickman and Allen (1991) view action research as informed decision making which involves setting educational goals, engaging in a research process, and sharing data. In their view of action research, a small team takes responsibility for the research and feeds the information back into the governance process, thus influencing all members of the school community. Calhoun (1994) also advocates for schoolwide action research as a means of achieving school change.

The teacher as researcher or reflective practitioner is an individual form of action research and focuses on engaging individual teachers in structured inquiry into their own practice. Schon's reflective practitioner (1983) engages the individual teacher as researcher. Through reflection, the teacher makes sense of experiences and engages in personal and professional development. In this model, the teacher acts as informed decision maker, reflecting on practice, looking back at action, sensing gaps in information and knowledge, seeking out that knowledge and making decisions based on reflection and information (Brubaker, Case, & Reagan, 1994). Reflective practice allows the teacher as an individual to search for solutions and ways to improve, building on his/her strengths, and thinking carefully and deeply about new ideas and approaches. This teacher as researcher model can lead to improved professionalism, and self and school renewal.

Action research and the teacher as researcher model hold very similar goals, but different foci. Action research is usually conducted to effect schoolwide change. Proponents of action research agree with Sarason's view of the school as the unit of change (1990). Action research is conducted to change the culture of the school, recognizing that change occurs not in a vacuum, but in a living, breathing school with its own beliefs, rituals, values and patterns of interaction.

The teacher as researcher/reflective practitioner model fits more closely with Fullan's view of change as highly personal and beginning with the individual. Change, according to Fullan (1993), is a process that cannot be mandated. Each participant in change must construct his/her own understanding. Tyack and Cuban (1994) believe that an inside-out approach to change, with small changes specific to a

particular context, driven by teachers, is the most effective change.

Teaching Children Considered At-Risk of Failure

Many of the schools engaged in restructuring efforts are seeking more effective ways to reach children who are at risk of failure. Many of these children growing up in poverty often achieve poorly in school. Because they start school lacking many of the experiences other children take for granted, they are often perceived as "behind" other children and are "remediated" so that they can "catch up". Instead of catching up through a remedial approach, they fall further and further behind, in part because of the slow-paced instruction that lacks challenge. Instead of recognizing the strengths these students bring to school and building on these strengths, teachers try to "fix" the students by emphasizing the basics through drill and practice (Means, Chelemer, & Knapp, 1991; Levin, 1995). Many restructuring efforts have resulted in detracking schools and a reexamination of the curriculum and instruction offered to low-achieving students (Knapp, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 1990).

There is also increased attention to the impact teachers' beliefs and expectations have on students' learning and achievement. Many reform advocates believe that we cannot change schools without changing the beliefs and expectations teachers hold for poor minority children (Levin, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). While Javits focuses primarily on the issue of the under-representation of rural African American children in gifted programs, the project's basic premise is that all children can learn at high levels, given a challenging, rich learning environment that supports and encourages their curiosity. Through a search for nontraditional ways

to identify children who are potentially gifted and by using methods and approaches adapted from gifted and talented programs in the classroom, Javits staff believe that the children who are potentially gifted will "bubble-up" to the top, and all children will benefit (Swanson, 1995).

This premise connects closely with the philosophy of the Accelerated Schools Project -- that all children should be taught as if they are gifted and talented (Hopfenberg, Levin & Associates, 1993, Finnan, et. al. 1995). The Accelerated Schools Project believes that teachers must believe that all children benefit from"powerful learning," learning that engages children in experiences that challenge them to develop advanced skills, to think at higher levels and to work cooperatively as well as individually.

Facilitating Change - Linking Schoolwide and Individual Change

It is easy to propose changes in how we educate low-income, rural students, but it is often difficult to actually change schools and individual teachers. The literature is rich in accounts of the difficulties of implementing changes in schools and individuals (Sarason, 1990; Fullan, 1993; Wehlage, Smith & Lipton, 1992), but we are beginning to find that if the changes become a part of the school's culture, they are more apt to remain (Finnan, 1995) and that schoolwide change cannot ignore the deep personal change needed to change classroom practice. Elmore (1995) has found that the structural changes, such as moving to block scheduling and detracking schools are often easier to achieve than changes in attitudes, expectations, and classroom practice.

We argue that school culture change is more likely to occur when the same goals are presented through separate but related interventions. For example, both Javits and ASP hold the belief that all students should be viewed in terms of their strengths and that those strengths should be used as the basis of student learning. Javits takes the approach of offering intensive and sustained staff development, helping individual teachers see student strengths and demonstrating to teachers how those strengths can become the basis for instruction in the classroom. ASP seeks to change the culture of the school so that all members of the school community share an expectation that all children can learn at high levels and that the strengths of everyone in the school community are recognized and built upon. Guided by a shared vision for the school, the entire school community makes decisions about how to accelerate the learning of all students.

Middleton Elementary School

Middleton Elementary[3] is a Schoolwide Title I Project school, with approximately 87% African American and 13% Caucasian students. Over 90% of the students are on free or reduced lunch. The school, in coastal South Carolina, is located 45 miles north of the nearest city, but only a few miles away from a nearby shrimping and fishing village. The school is located on a major highway, surrounded by woods, fields, and scattered homes. The school building is attractive and relatively new, built in the 1970s. Many of the students live in small enclaves off of the main highway, with quite a few of the students living in "extended family compounds" consisting of small homes or trailers that are grouped together on a piece of property.

When the principal was assigned to the school in 1983, she was determined to bring the best she could to the school. She grew up in the community and knew its strengths, but she was also aware of the isolation of the students. She began hiring young, energetic teachers, mostly from an upscale, suburban community about twenty-five miles from the school. The principal describes the teachers as, "...thinkers, doers, pioneers, and explorers." Today, over 90% of the staff commutes to the school. The average age of the teachers at the school is thirty-five, and most teachers have 5 to 10 years of experience teaching. Thirty-seven of forty teachers are Caucasian; the remaining three are African American. The staff includes eleven teacher assistants, all of whom are African American. The teaching force is stable at Middleton Elementary, with little turnover from year to year. This stability has been achieved in recent years.

Method and Data Sources

Each project involves teachers in action research in different ways: ASP involves teachers in schoolwide action research, and Javits uses a teacher as researcher or reflective practitioner model. In Javits, the teacher as researcher model is combined with a case study approach to examine change during involvement in Javits. Research techniques include reflective practice, formal and informal observations in the natural setting of project classrooms, individual and group interviews with teachers and the school's principal, reflective journals kept by teachers, and student work samples gathered across classrooms. Quantitative data are also examined as sources of information. Member checks were conducted to ensure accuracy of the data (Yin, 1989).

While the Javits project focuses on the individual teacher as researcher, with teachers reflecting on their practice by using peer coaching and journal writing, ASP involves groups of teachers in disciplined inquiry leading to action. The Accelerated Schools process is essentially an action research process. During the taking stock phase of the project, teachers determine problem areas, design data collection strategies, and collect and analyze data. Once teachers engage in the inquiry process, they continue to conduct action research by developing and testing hypotheses, seeking solutions, developing and implementing action plans, and evaluating their actions. This research is teacher-designed and results in changes in schools and classrooms.

Findings

Positive changes resulting from the related interventions include improved student achievement, teacher empowerment, and modifications in the school program. Each of these changes will be discussed below.

Improved Student Achievement It is noteworthy that of the three schools involved in Javits, Middleton Elementary School, the only one of the three involved in ASP, has the greatest degree of positive change. It is likely that the combination of the two complementary paradigms of Javits and ASP help to create the powerful impact. It is also likely that the school's culture was receptive to these changes when both Javits and ASP began. Nonetheless, the combined influence of the two initiatives is producing positive changes for children.

Teachers and the principal observe an increase in higher level thinking activities and detailed explanations in classes throughout the school. Teachers

credit the improved achievement to a change in expectations of teachers. For example, one teacher said " ...that's when the idea came about and I thought - Wow! We should teach all children as if they are gifted," after completing the first Javits Summer Institute for Teachers.

Middleton School's students are involved in learning activities tied to the real world and are learning about the value of education through the study of successful individuals. For example, one teacher's class has partnered with a local bank, and they are learning about entrepreneurship, banking, and running a business through this year-long simulation. The principal notes that both Javits and ASP have contributed to the children in the school feeling that they:

> "...are somebody. It's the high expectations for their learning, and its higher order thinking and teaching that teachers are doing. Teachers are teaching this way because they want the student to understand that he or she can get the work this way."

Other teachers agree that higher expectations and recognition of students' strengths have been key in improving student performance. One teacher said:

> "We have become more aware that everyone learns in different ways, and that once we apply this awareness to our teaching, the children's talents begin to bloom, and they see that they are capable."

Javits provided teachers with materials support as part of the demonstration of "powerful learning". A teacher noted that the emphasis on quality multicultural materials enables her to "zero in" on advanced thinking skills instruction, as she said, "...with all children -- not just with gifted and talented."

Javits documented quantitative results from standardized testing which suggest that the improved curriculum is beginning to make a difference in students'

achievement (O'Tuel, 1995). These results include five newly identif kindergarten students and a significant increase of standardized ach scores in the first grade group of students.

Teacher Empowerment Several of the teachers have taken a active and vocal role in the school's decision making and leadership involvement in both projects. The three kindergarten teachers, the involved in Javits for the full three years, have emerged as school le these teachers talk about their increased level of involvement in sha making. The teachers make decisions about their own staff develop and the materials and equipment needed to enhance their instructio They speak much more openly to colleagues when they see students treated with respect and value. The teachers now take an active part presentations to the school board and the upper level administrative teacher wrote in her journal,

> "Javits has been a great influence on my teaching. It has provi things to enhance it. Exposure to materials, research, resource activities, funds, opportunities for observing and tools for ide among some of the things Javits has provided me."

One of the school's highly traditional teachers has made dram her teaching techniques, which have positively affected her students a vivid example to other teachers as she demonstrates her powerful teaching is spiritual in nature and clearly connected to respect and h for students. The principal commented on this teacher,

> "...And I see [her] and I say, 'Thank God' because people like taught for as many years as she has, just float away and go dow

> going up! I don't think these changes in the teachers would have come about as fruitfully if not for Accelerated Schools and Javits. It really has made a difference."

The teacher herself noted that, when she was called on by the principal to speak to the local board and the superintendent's team, she,"...got up there and got my head strong, and I said I'm gonna do it." She went on to say, "I did it, and I enjoyed every minute of it."

The Accelerated Schools Project has also empowered teachers as the principal turns responsibilities over to the steering committee and cadres. Teachers who previously closed their doors and interacted little with others on the staff have emerged as leaders. Teachers are learning to write grants, are exploring successful strategies at other schools, and are making presentations to administrators and other teachers. These occurrences were rare before they joined the Accelerated Schools Project.

Finally, the principal of the school (confirmed by our observations, her own admission, and comments from teachers) has changed during the three year course of Javits and two years in ASP. A strong, dynamic leader before either project came to her school, the principal came to see that sharing her power with the school staff made her an even more powerful leader. She admits she is not a natural at empowerment, but she has changed greatly by watching the powerful effect of teacher empowerment. One teacher said:

> "[She] is an enabler. There has been a lot of change -- a lot of things that we have been able to do that I don't think would have been possible if [the principal] hadn't supported what we wanted to do."

Another said,

> "Also, with [the principal's] support, I feel like I can stand tall as a tree out there and just teach with just her support."

One teacher described the change in the leadership in the school in this way,

> "I think we have gone Japanese. Now we are a big think tank. Everyone has a say in the decision making process...I think it was a big step."

Programmatic Changes Programmatic changes related to Javits are compelling enough that the district Title I coordinator offered to continue funding the activities after federal funds through the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Act ended. These changes include:

- the use of a consulting teacher model to accelerate learning and to create powerful learning experiences for teachers and students; and
- the creation of a model classroom, rich in resources, where others in the school could see acceleration and powerful learning in action with "their students."

This consulting teacher model allows teachers to see the teaching and learning process with their own students. A teacher, using strategies typically used in gifted and talented classes, demonstrates lessons in the regular classroom setting with all students. Classroom teachers observe during these lessons and later debrief with the consulting teacher about how the lesson might be adapted or improved. Teachers are asked to think reflectively about how they might use the strategies themselves. Teachers then are encouraged to apply the same strategies in a lesson they teach. One teacher commented, "During the consulting teacher's lesson, I was able to observe the students and give them immediate feedback." Another teacher

said that when the consulting teacher came into her classroom to model:

> " We did lessons that those children will not forget. They remember those lessons that we did together, but this model also allowed us the time to actually watch our children. There is not much time when a teacher can sit back and observe her children. When [the consulting teacher] comes in it gives you the time to look at what the children are doing -- it is amazing what this experience allows you to learn about your own teaching and the children in your classroom."

The second phase of the consulting teacher demonstrations is to establish a model classroom where teachers at Middleton School can visit and observe "powerful learning" and acceleration within their school. The consulting teacher worked with a selected teacher to plan and equip a model classroom. It is interesting to note that the teacher whose classroom became the "model class" is a teacher who has been in the classroom over twenty-five years and who is one of the only original teachers from when the school first opened. She does not fit the stereotypical idea of an innovative teacher, but she has embraced this challenge and is providing an exemplary model for the teachers in her school. This model classroom is the site of "in-house" staff development for teachers from throughout the school. The principal, pleased with the transformation of the model classroom, said:

> "I've been talking with [the consulting teacher] and I would like [her] to assist in transforming the other classrooms the way [the model classroom] has been transformed, because it's not just a room with a whole lot of busy centers, it's a classroom where centers are put together and designed in the interest of the children."

As all of these changes are occurring as a result of teachers researching their own needs and reflecting on their own practice, changes are also occurring schoolwide through the efforts of cadres formed through the Accelerated Schools Project. Middleton Elementary School has five cadres, each focused on critical needs

identified during the taking stock phase of the Accelerated Schools process. The five cadres are: Math, Science and Technology, Reading and Language Arts, Student Needs, Home and School, and Cultural Expressions. Each cadre is using the inquiry process to identify why problems exist, to identify solutions to the problems, to develop action plans that are eventually implemented and evaluated.

For example, the reading and language arts cadre developed a number of hypotheses to explain why many students are unable to read, write, listen and communicate effectively. The hypotheses include: no school-wide consistent reading program, a lack of articulation between grade levels, requirement of reading which was not related to the students' personal interests or experiences, and the need for more reading materials. As a result of testing these hypotheses, the Family Reading Program was established to provide more school-wide consistency in reading. The cadre is also establishing an in-school postal service to encourage writing and to relate reading and writing to students' interests.

Significance and Conclusion

Although it is difficult to make generalizations from a single school, it is possible to look at the lessons learned from the case and the implications of those lessons for other schools. The lessons we have learned support both the use of action research to bring about school change and the linking of initiatives with similar goals but different paradigms guiding the achievement of these goals.

One lesson we have learned is that teachers will change their classroom behavior and the culture of their school if they feel empowered to do so. Javits and ASP encourage teachers to take risks, try different, unfamiliar strategies, take on new

leadership roles, reflect on their own practice, and systematically examine schoolwide issues. They essentially build communities of inquiry (St. John et. al., 1995) that are supported by individual and group actions.

Another lesson we learned is that it is essential to build understanding of the processes and philosophy among the entire school staff, beginning with the principal. This is a central tenet of the Accelerated Schools Project, most clearly articulated in one of the three guiding principles -- unity of purpose. Even when change is directed at classroom behavior, it is important that the principal support and facilitate the changes sought (Slovacek, 1995). While most would agree that change is difficult under the best circumstances and can be painful, we have found that a deeper understanding of this process, through disciplined inquiry and reflection, has enabled people to make it through the difficulties that always accompany change (Fullan, 1993).

A third lesson learned is that change initiatives that support each other simply make sense. Instead of creating obstacles that block productive change, the Accelerated Schools Project and Javits worked in concert to accelerate learning in the classroom and to transform the school culture. The complementary missions of the initiatives reduce obstacles and support change. The involvement of teachers in the key decisions in the school, while at the same time demonstrating to them how to accelerate the learning process for their students, leads to a commitment to raise expectations for all children and to a realization that teachers can make a difference in students' achievement. Schools often have many different programs and projects with conflicting missions, creating a splintered pathway that rarely results

in school improvement. Middleton Elementary School's efforts focused and are strengthened through its participation in ASP and Javits.

The final lesson learned is that change initiatives need sustained support. The Javits project successfully uses a consulting teacher model, with a "real" teacher demonstrating, coaching and supporting instructional change in the classroom. The Accelerated Schools Project uses a coaching model to help internalize the philosophy of the project, and the decision making system and governance structure into the school culture. Both the consulting teacher and the coach provide sustained support for teachers as they make hard decisions about how and when to change their classrooms and school.

Did the level of teacher professionalism improve as a result of Javits and ASP, or did we select this school because of a high level of professionalism on the staff? Was the leadership of the principal and the emerging leadership of teachers attractive, or did the two projects enhance and develop the leadership of the school? These are the difficult questions that are always asked of successful restructuring efforts, and they really can never be answered because school change is too complex to find simple attribution. Once teachers realize the benefits of reflection, inquiry, and risk taking, unanticipated changes occur. Did the two projects cause these changes to occur? We cannot say that they caused the changes, but the two projects did give the teachers research and reflection tools and new paradigms through which to see their students. With these in hand, the teachers are the cause of the change.

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1 Project SEARCH, Selection, Enrichment and Acceleration of Rural Children began in October 1992 and ended in September 1995.
2 Accelerated Schools Project began at Middleton Elementary in August 1994.
3 The name of the school has been changed.